

## Little Forgotten Bars:

### The Invisible History of Blacksmith Coffeehouse

All cities are geological. You can't take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends. We move within a *closed* landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward the past. Certain *shifting* angles, certain *receding* perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary. It must be sought in the magical locales of fairy tales and surrealist writings: castles, endless walls, little forgotten bars, mammoth caverns, casino mirrors.<sup>1</sup>

Along Lower Westheimer in the heart of Montrose lies Blacksmith Coffeehouse, a modish neighborhood retreat that opened in January 2013. Twentysomethings on laptops, hipster urbanites with strategic (if not clichéd) tattoos, and aging punk rockers gather around chai lattes and café americanos to read, work, gossip, and relax. Blacksmith is situated in a refurbished brick building whose history in Houston is as iconic as it is humanizing. For nearly 40 years the building was home to Mary's, a centrally located gay bar whose popularity grew to national proportions throughout the LBGT community in the 1970's and 80's. Originally, Mary's was known for its reputation of anonymous public sex and thriving drug scene. It announced itself from the street with a large mural on the building's exterior, a risqué and campy painting of various men in bondage wear flirting at the bar. Circle jerks were a nightly occurrence at Mary's, taking place in the grass-covered patio behind the building more commonly known as The Outback. Bleachers were installed for the less adventurous, but nevertheless curious voyeur.

As the AIDS crisis took hold in the 1980's, the mood at Mary's became undoubtedly somber and the bar quickly became a meeting place for activists and sufferers alike. According to *Free Press Houston*, "Members of the gay community recall that there was a time when Mary's regulars were dying at a rate of three a month, and that it wasn't unusual for the bar to host a Celebration of Life once a week:"

So many patrons were lost, interned or had their ashes scattered in The Outback that the numbers can never be known. However, the Gulf Coast Archive and Museum of GLBT History estimates that as many as 300 people may have been laid to rest at the bar. Among those who chose Mary's as their final resting place was [the owner] Farmer who was interned at the bar in 1991, along with his beloved German Shepherd.<sup>2</sup>

Mary's was a locus of shared grief and mourning, and for many it offered a place to call home for those in the LBGT community who felt dispossessed, disenfranchised, and abandoned. The Outback was quite literally a resting place for the marginalized masses, and Mary's remained a beloved Houston sanctuary and watering hole for decades thereafter.

Upon finally closing its doors in 2009, the building was eventually sold to local restaurateurs and has since been transformed into Blacksmith Coffeehouse. Being familiar with Mary's past, and an occasional customer back in the late 1990's, I was pained to discover that what was once The

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/Chtcheglov.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.freepresshouston.com/marys-mural-returns-but-is-montrose-still-the-gay-borhood/>

Outback, home to so many graves and invaluable history, is now a stark parking lot covered over with concrete.

In *Formulary for a New Urbanism*, Ivan Chtcheglov argues that:

We know that an object that is not consciously noticed at the time of a first *visit* can, by its absence during subsequent visits, provoke an indefinable impression: as a result of this sighting backward in time, *the absence of the object becomes a presence one can feel*. More precisely: although the quality of the impression generally remains indefinite, it nevertheless varies with the nature of the removed object and the importance accorded it by the visitor, ranging from serene joy to terror.<sup>3</sup>

I had not been inside Blacksmith since it opened. However, upon entering I was struck by the impression that the establishment is both defined and haunted by its past. The absence of any demonstrative memorial to the dead is palpable. It is a resonating presence, evoking not terror but acute personal sadness. Not even a plaque or newspaper article to honor its past (and there have been many). If, as Guy Debord describes, psychogeography is "the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behavior of individuals,"<sup>4</sup> then the space that Blacksmith now inhabits is unquestionably one that weighs heavily for me.

Aside from the parking lot that defiles countless graves, what is striking is that the décor of the coffeehouse seems to be an ineffective and rather paltry nod to the gay community. There is a large orange and black print of Freddie Mercury on one wall. And other walls are papered with a configuration of tiny black on white triangles. The pattern is so understated that it's difficult to discern if the triangles were an intentional choice or a chance selection. Perhaps the only genuine acknowledgment of the building's heritage is a very faint triangle etched into the floor. I would not have known it was there if not for my friendship with the person who carved it there, a local artist who was contracted to refinish the floors.

Considering Chtcheglov's assertion that all cities are geological, "you can't take three steps without encountering ghosts bearing all the prestige of their legends,"<sup>5</sup> it becomes clear that Mary's is a haunting presence and provocative legend in Houston topography. If only Blacksmith would honor that heritage.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/Chtcheglov.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Guy Debord (1955) *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*. Les Lèvres Nues #6 (Paris, September 1955). Translated by Ken Knabb.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/Chtcheglov.htm>